**The ‘Crayola Curriculum’**

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**By Mike Schmoker**

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We may have the reading crisis all wrong. It may have far less to do with the "reading wars" than we presumed. I am convinced that the following explanation is, without doubt, the least recognized but most salient explanation for why there is a reading gap between rich and poor, for why so many kids reach upper-elementary and middle school with less than even minimal ability to read and make sense of text. The explanation is both simple and shocking. But the evidence for it is compelling. Best of all, this explanation holds out enormous hope for dramatic, near-term improvements at every level of education.

A couple of years ago, I found myself touring a school that had received an international award for excellence in staff development. Roaming from class to class—on what was clearly a "showcase day"—I went from being puzzled to astonished by what I saw.

Two things were terribly wrong: One, a majority of students were sitting in small, unsupervised groups, barely, if at all, engaged in what were supposedly learning activities. Many of the children were chatting. Second, but more important, was that the activities themselves seemed to bear no relation whatsoever to *reading*, the presumed subject being taught at the time. After seeing this pattern in several classes, I finally asked my host what kinds of gains had been made in this award-winning but high-poverty school. I was regretfully informed that there had been no gains, what with the hardships these children faced at home and in their neighborhoods.

This had to be an aberration, I thought. Nonetheless, I came away from the experience a little jaded, and anxious to see if this pattern held in other places. So I began, as part of my work with school districts—most, but not all of them low-performing—to tour early-grade classrooms *during the reading period.* I purposely took several people along with me each time: building and district administrators, teachers, even an occasional superintendent. I briefed them on what to look for: (1) reasonably good reading activities, the kind almost anyone would agree on, and (2) the majority of students at least nominally attending to them. We wandered in and out of classrooms, deliberately returning to many of them to see how long students were engaged in certain activities. Along the way, I asked the group how the lessons stood up to our scrutiny.

From the start, the virtually unanimous impression was that (1) most of the activities had very little relation to reading—to acquiring the ability to read, and (2) students were barely, if at all, engaged in their work. We weren't looking for perfection; we were looking for a reasonable amount of student engagement in garden-variety literacy activities.

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After a few such tours, I became more convinced that something was truly awry, something more profound than the debates that perennially rage about such matters as phonics vs. whole language. After touring about 50 classrooms in several schools in several states—always with others from that same school or district—I became doubly convinced. I am now up to about 300 classrooms, and the pattern still holds.

*What is actually going on during these early-grade reading periods?* A number of things, but the activity that overwhelmed all legitimate literacy activities may surprise you. Students were not reading, they weren't writing about what they had read, they weren't learning the alphabet or its corresponding sounds; they weren't learning words or sentences or how to read short texts.

They were coloring. Coloring on a scale unimaginable to us before these classroom tours. The crayons were ever-present. Sometimes, students were cutting or building things out of paper (which they had colored) or just talking quietly while sitting at "activity centers" that were presumably for the purpose of promoting reading and writing skills. These centers, too, were ubiquitous, and a great source of pride to many teachers and administrators. They were great for classroom management—and patently, tragically counterproductive.

One of the questions I would occasionally ask teachers during these rounds, especially if it was late in the school year, was whether or not students knew the alphabet and its sounds. The teachers would regularly say no, but add that, after all, these were either poor or second-language students. The question in my mind, never uttered, was this: "Why wouldn't they be learning the alphabet? Why are they coloring instead of being taught to read?"

**‘We've been stunned [that] ... kids are given more coloring assignments than mathematics and writing assignments.’**

**Kati Haycock,**

Director

Education Trust

Well into this journey, I ran into a friend and fellow consultant who travels all over the world and has also been in a great number of classrooms. He too vehemently decried, and confirmed, exactly what I was seeing—even in many high- scoring schools. Not long after that, I heard Joyce Bales, the superintendent of the Pueblo, Colo., schools, implore her principals to be on the watch for the excessive "coloring, cutting, and pasting" she saw going on in elementary classrooms during reading instruction.

This story ends with my listening to an audiotape of Kati Haycock, the director of the Education Trust, a Washington- based nonprofit group that is working to improve achievement in poor schools. Her teams had toured thousands of classrooms as part of their landmark study on disadvantaged schools that had beaten the odds. Look hard at her remarks, which may be as revealing of the current context as anything ever said or written:

*I can only summarize the findings by saying we've been stunned [that] ... kids are given more coloring assignments than mathematics and writing assignments.  
I want to repeat that, because I'm not joking, nor am I exaggerating.*

For those who aren't yet convinced, I urge you to conduct just such an audit yourselves.

As for my own classroom tours, in every case but one, the people who accompanied me have found them to be a revelation—and a hugely positive one. The one administrator who did not found herself at odds with her faculty, which had been mobilized to seize the opportunity this new awareness made possible. In one high-poverty district where I made several visits, the principals were not only ecstatic, but ecstatic at the opportunity these observations created. In two years, their scores on the Stanford Achievement Test-9th Edition for grades 2-4 went up by 25 percentile points; in math, they went up by 40 points.

None of these tours was conducted in a spirit of accusation. On the contrary, we were looking for patterns. It was those patterns, not individual teachers, that were discussed. Rather than condemn teachers, it is time for us to condemn the traditions, the institutional inertia, that account for these practices. They represent nothing less than a crisis in teaching, in teacher training, in supervision and supervisory training, and in reading research itself, which is still far too esoteric and remote from the trenches where teachers teach and students learn.

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We should see this as an unparalleled opportunity for near-term improvement. It is time to redirect our focus to attend to simple things: the amount of time kids spend reading, just plain reading; and drill—yes, drill—in letters, sounds, and phonemic patterns. It is worth emphasizing that the most important single activity to promote reading *is reading*. It is even better if this is done with a purpose, and if we regularly write about and discuss what we read. Several studies have shown that having students read an additional 280,000 words per year can mean the difference between scoring at the 20th percentile and scoring at the 50th. That's like reading two books the length of a Harry Potter novel (about 155,000 words).

But these are not the activities we encountered in the classrooms I visited, even as we returned to them several times over the course of the reading period.

If our perceptions are well-founded, if Ms. Haycock and others are correct, then all of us may be in denial about the actualities of time and tasks in early-grade reading classrooms. The logic is pretty plain: Kids, especially those in disadvantaged settings, don't have a chance unless we teach them to read, early and well. This can happen the moment we charge teachers and administrators in every school and district to give reading and language arts instruction the thoroughgoing, common-sense review it so desperately needs.

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